



**STRATEGY
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PROJECT**

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**THE VIETNAM WAR,
WHY ESCALATE?**

BY

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ABSTRACT

AUTHOR: LTC William H. Fritz Jr.

TITLE: The Vietnam War, Why Escalate?

FORMAT: Strategy Research Project

DATE: 10 April 2000

PAGES: 22

CLASSIFICATION: Unclassified

The United States involvement in Vietnam began in 1950 when President Truman provided aid to the French military in Indochina and deployed 35 American advisors. By 1969 the United States had 543,000 troops in Vietnam engaged in a war to thwart communist expansion in the region and stabilize the fledgling South Vietnamese Government. The most dramatic increases occurred between 1965 and 1968 following the initial deployment of U.S. ground combat troops. The chain of events that forced President Johnson and his advisors to choose this course of action have been the topic of debate for 35 years, with conclusions ranging from benign criticism to charges of criminal misconduct. This paper will document the incremental increases of U.S. involvement in the war effort and explore the rationale for each specific escalation decision.

The escalation of the War in Vietnam was a direct result of the inability of the U.S. to make a firm commitment during the early stages of the conflict. Had we had a better understanding of the situation early in the game, we may have known that an early and strong commitment of U.S. forces could have forced Hanoi to accept the South Vietnamese Government and the partitioning of the country.

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THE VIETNAM WAR, WHY ESCALATE?

The United States involvement in Vietnam began in 1950 when President Truman provided aid to the French military in Indochina and deployed 35 American advisors. By 1969 the United States had 543,000 troops in Vietnam engaged in a war to thwart communist expansion in the region and stabilize the fledgling South Vietnamese Government.¹ The most dramatic increases occurred between 1965 and 1968 following the initial deployment of U.S. ground combat troops. The chain of events that forced President Johnson and his advisors to choose this course of action have been the topic of debate for 35 years, with conclusions ranging from benign criticism to charges of criminal misconduct. This paper will document the incremental increases of U.S. involvement in the war effort and explore the rationale for each specific escalation decision.

THE BEGINNING

Vietnam is a country with a history dominated by conflict. It declared its independence following World War II, but conflict between the North and South for control of the nation continued. The French, in an attempt to re-establish colonial rule, fought and lost to the Vietminh in the North during 1954. The Geneva accords, signed on 21 July 1954 by both the French and Vietminh, ended the years of hostility, but left the country divided along the seventeenth parallel.² The communists controlled the North and the French the South. The accord called for elections in July 1956 that would determine a political settlement and unify the country under one government. The North believed they would carry the elections, finally uniting Vietnam under communist rule. The United States backed the formation of a democratic government in the south, while Ho Chi Minh called for the establishment of a unified, but communist, Vietnam. The elections never took place and in May 1959, the communist government in the North called for a "strong North Vietnamese base for helping the South Vietnamese to overthrow the government and expel the United States."³

The communists began a campaign of infiltration into the south and utilized insurgent tactics to diminish the local inhabitants support for the South Vietnamese government. In late spring, 1956, in order to assist the South in countering aggression from Hanoi, the United States increased its support to South Vietnam, creating the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG), establishing training centers, providing equipment and funding the army.⁴

President Kennedy continued supporting the South Vietnamese with advisors and money, but was waning in his commitment, as evidenced by his approval of National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) Number 263, ordering the withdrawal of 1,000 U.S. advisors.⁵ He would never live to see the reduction. On 23 November 1963, Lyndon B. Johnson became the President of the United States following the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

PRESIDENT JOHNSON TAKES OVER

The Joint Chiefs had long argued that the restrictions on military action in Vietnam made the task at hand more complex, time consuming and costly. In response to this long-standing pressure, President Johnson approved the guidance contained in National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) Number 273, on 26 November 1963. The U.S. was now committed to "assist the people and Government of that country to win their contest against the externally directed and supported Communist conspiracy."⁶ The memorandum also stated that "planning should include different levels of possible increased activity."⁷

The turning point in U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War occurred following two North Vietnamese attacks on U.S. Navy destroyers patrolling in the Gulf of Tonkin, in early August 1964. In response, President Johnson ordered limited air strikes on North Vietnam.⁸ Naval pilots flew their planes on 64 sorties against North Vietnamese patrol boats and the oil storage forces at Vinh, losing two aircraft with one pilot killed and one captured.⁹ The U.S. had now entered the war. The Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution on 7 August 1964 that gave President Johnson the authority to take action against North Vietnam as he saw fit.¹⁰

The limited bombing campaign did not stem North Vietnamese aggression with ground action in the south intensifying and Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) casualties mounting. Reports coming out of Vietnam from the embassy and military headquarters were divergent in their opinions for resolving the conflict. They were however consistent in their assessment of a situation growing worse by the day.

ROLLING THUNDER

In order to gain a better perspective of the situation and develop recommendations for future actions, President Johnson sent a team of his closest advisors from Washington to Vietnam on 27 January 1965. During the last night of their visit, 6-7 February 1965, the Viet Cong (VC) attacked the adviser compound and airfield at Pleiku, killing eight American servicemen.¹¹ This act demanded a response, and increased bombing was the vehicle.

Discussion in Washington began immediately and President Johnson approved the general concept of retaliatory air strikes by 9:00 p.m., 6 February 1965 (time difference of 12 hours between Vietnam and Washington).¹² Discussions on the form of the attack and the specific targets raged in Washington for over a week. Finally, the President approved a compromise plan for striking a naval installation in North Vietnam and the Joint Chiefs of Staff issued the execute order on 18 February for an attack on the 20th, two days later. The initial attack was delayed until 2 March. OPERATION ROLLING THUNDER was now a reality.

GROUND FORCES: THE FIRST 30,000

Security of the air bases supporting the raids on the North became a growing concern due to the increased activity in their immediate vicinity and concern regarding the capability of the ARVN units assigned in their sectors to mount a strong defense. The President, under the auspices of the Gulf of

Tonkin Resolution, approved NSAM 328 on 06 April 1965. The memorandum directed the deployment of 18-20,000 additional troops "to fill out existing units and supply needed logistic personnel" and broadened the mission of the Marines "to permit their more active use" in fighting the Viet Cong in South Vietnam.¹³ The first Marines had landed in Da Nang on 08 March 1965 with the mission to guard the airfield located there.

President Johnson did not want a long protracted conflict in Vietnam to divert resources and attention from his domestic civil rights programs. He wanted this resolved in the shortest time possible. The best way to do achieve this goal was to increase the U.S. ground presence and intensify operations toward that end. Ambassador Taylor provided three arguments for reinforcing the Marines, the need to perform tasks that the Government of Vietnam forces are unable to do, the need to do them faster and the need to be prepared for future crises and contingencies.¹⁴ With this in mind, President Johnson, during a 13 April luncheon at the White House, decided to deploy the 173d Airborne Brigade to the Bien Hoa airfield complex and the Vung Tau coastal landing site for security and counterinsurgency combat operations.¹⁵ The 173d closed on 07 May 1965 and experienced their first combat casualties on 22 May.¹⁶ U.S. troop strength was now approximately 33,000.

100,000 TROOPS

The U.S. actions were not bringing the North Vietnamese to the bargaining table as was hoped. Senior officials were coming to the realization that bombing alone would not break the will of the Viet Cong in South Vietnam and that the inability of the ARVN units to mount an effective counterinsurgency operation may require additional reinforcement of the U.S. forces. On 20 April 1965, Ambassador Taylor recommended that the U.S. adopt a phased approach to incrementally increasing the ground troop strength. Phase I recommended an increase in U.S. troop strength from 33,000 to 82,000. Phase II and III would include an additional U.S. division, bringing the total U.S. strength to 123,000.¹⁷

The concern over the fighting performance of the ARVN forces and the fear of a breakdown of their morale prompted General Westmoreland, Commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam, to make recommendations for increasing U.S. involvement. On 8 June 1965 he forwarded a recommendation to the President that U.S. increase its' troop strength to 151,000. He also indicated that it may be necessary to bring the total U.S. commitment to 170,000 troops.¹⁸

At this point, the U.S. was still confident that the Vietnamese government would be able to continue the fight against the communist forces of the North. In reality, their battlefield strength was declining. General Westmoreland recognized this problem and in a telegram to Admiral Sharp, Commander in Chief, Pacific, stated that the ARVN did not feel that they could survive without additional U.S. forces.¹⁹ His main argument was that the VC were destroying ARVN battalions faster than they could be reconstituted.²⁰

Officials in Washington were becoming concerned that the U.S. was becoming involved in a war of increasing momentum. Undersecretary of State Ball wrote a memorandum to President Johnson, on 18

June 1965, stating that "we are beginning a new war – the United States *directly* against the Viet Cong." He continues that the large-scale introduction of American forces may not be able to fight the war successfully, "even with 500,000 Americans in South Vietnam."²¹ He aptly predicts that the more forces we send into South Vietnam, the harder we will find it to extricate ourselves without unacceptable costs.²²

The situation on the ground was continuing to decline. ARVN forces were losing significant numbers to battle casualties as well as desertion. The situation was so bad that the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), General Wheeler, stated in a telegram to General Westmoreland that the introduction of small numbers, 10-20,000, will have little effect on the outcome of the war. He continued to state that he believed that without a significant increase in U.S. troop strength, "South Vietnam would not survive."²³

Now the senior leadership, both military and civilian, involved that make the strategic decisions regarding Vietnam are stating that our current strength of 123,000 may not be enough. They are primed to accept requests for increased effort. General Westmoreland feeds the fire when he describes the struggle as a "war of attrition" in a 24 June telegram to General Wheeler. He further identifies the requirement for an additional infantry or airborne division to "provide an offensive punch and get the ARVN troops in the III Corps area on the offensive." Westmoreland continues by claiming that "it is time for all concerned face up to fact that we must be prepared for a long war which will probably involve increasing numbers of U.S. troops."²⁴

General Wheeler responds to the call by developing a plan to deploy additional combat units to Vietnam. He cabled General Westmoreland on 28 June proposing to add 52,000 troops to the current force of 9 Marine battalions (two Battalion Landing Teams (BLT) and an F4B squadron enroute) and 8 Army battalions (6 enroute) in Vietnam. These troops would consist of an Army air mobile division (8 battalions), the remainder of the 1st Infantry Division (6 battalions) and a Marine Amphibious Brigade (3 BLTs and a VFMA fighter attack squadron and support troops totaling 8,000 Marines). The ground force package would also include three artillery battalions, thirteen companies of assault helicopters, eight platoons of Chinook helicopters and three Hawk battalions. The air component would include four additional attack fighter squadrons and their required logistic support. The reinforcements would "increase U.S./Government of Vietnam (GVN) military strength to the level required to counter current and likely VC ground Strength."²⁵ This incremental increase, Phase II of the build-up, would bring the total U.S. commitment to 175,000 troops in 34 battalions.

Ambassador Taylor met with Generals Nguyen Cao Ky (Premier and Chairman of the Executive Council), Nguyen Van Thieu (Chairman of the Directorate and Chief of State), Nguyen Huu Co (Commissioner General of the Armed Forces) and Pfam Xuan Chieu (Secretary General, National Leadership Council) the following day. The atmosphere seemed somber to Taylor, who hypothesized that the generals were distressed by the deteriorating situation in the II Corps. General Ky explained to Taylor that the Vietnamese would have difficulty fielding combat-ready units to counter the growing

number of VC units anticipated to mobilize in the upcoming few months. He wanted more U.S. reinforcements to buy them time to mobilize additional ARVN forces.²⁶

Two days later General Westmoreland increased his Phase II requirement to 44 battalions. In a telegram to General Wheeler he claimed that the 34 battalions he previously mentioned will not achieve desired goal of convincing the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV)/VC that they cannot win. He felt that the VC were too deeply committed to be influenced by anything other than overpowering force. He also stated the VC and DRV forces would be able to overrun isolated district capitals, severely interdicting land routes of communication and consolidating where they had already made gains.²⁷ He described the overall situation as grim and commented that "the VC have not employed their full capabilities in this campaign... ARVN forces on the other hand are already experiencing difficulty in coping with this increased VC capability."²⁸ He was letting his superiors know that he would be asking for more.

200,000 TROOPS

The situation was getting out of hand and building momentum. Senior leaders and advisors were beginning to wonder where it would end. McGeorge Bundy wrote in a memorandum to Secretary of Defense McNamara "if we need 200,000 men now for these quite limited operations, may we not need 400,000 later?"²⁹

The Vietnam Panel, a sub-panel of the President's Panel on Foreign Affairs with former military leaders and statesmen as members, defined what was at stake in Vietnam and proposed a series of U.S. objectives in the region in a meeting on 8 July. They concluded that should Vietnam fall to the communists, Thailand would follow with severe impacts on Japan and India. The effect would be felt in Europe as well. If the U.S. let this happen in Vietnam, their credibility as a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), committed to defending Europe from a potential communist invasion lead by the Soviet Union, would be questionable. The Vietnam conflict was becoming a test of the free worlds' ability to defeat communist forces and stop the spread of their ideology throughout the world. The panel surmised that this would happen if the U.S. withdrew or suffered defeat. The group was in full agreement that the U.S. response to date had been relatively restrained and that the U.S. should make whatever increases were required.³⁰

Secretary McNamara developed four recommendations for Vietnam that were the topic of a 21 July meeting with President Johnson and other senior advisors. He discussed the deteriorating situation, describing the increased control that the VC had within the country, forcing the GVN into small enclaves where their effectiveness to control the populous was becoming increasingly ineffective.³¹ He recommended approval the request for increasing troop combat strength to 44 battalions, that Congress should appropriate additional funds to support the operation in Vietnam, increase the regular armed forces by 250,000 and authorize the call-up of approximately 235,000 Reserve and National Guard.³²

In open discussion, General Wheeler opined that the U.S. could not win the war within a year, regardless of the number of troops committed. He continued that the U.S. could possibly reverse the

trend within a year and see progress toward turning the tide against the North within three years. He suggested that the U.S. should transition to offensive operations to seek out and engage North Vietnamese main forces located in bases identified in intelligence reports.³³

The meeting ended without a decision, but President Johnson now had no expectation of a swift victory in Vietnam. He clearly understood that the conflict would last many years and require increased U.S. effort in terms of troops and resources.

On 22 July 1965, President Johnson convened another meeting of his top advisors. Sitting with the president were Secretary of Defense McNamara, Secretary of State Vance, the CJCS, General Wheeler, and several other top government officials. The main topic of the discussions centered on what were considered the three most viable U.S. options regarding Vietnam. They were, leave the country, maintain the present force and lose slowly, or increase the force by 100,000, understanding that more could be required.³⁴ Everyone present contributed in some part to the sideline discussions regarding public and world opinion, the cost of the conflict, casualty rates for the VC and their will to fight, civilian casualties, Chinese intervention and the effectiveness of the bombing campaign. McGeorge Bundy probably made the most controversial, yet prophetic statement about the U.S. involvement in the war thus far, which follows:

The Argument we will face: For 10 years every step we have taken has been based on a previous failure. All we have done has failed and caused us to take another step, which failed. As we get further into the bag, we get deeply bruised. Also, we have made excessive claims we haven't been able to realize. Also, after 20 years of warnings about a war in Asia, we are now doing what MacArthur and others have warned against. We are about to fight a war we can't fight and win, as the country we are trying to help is quitting. The failure on our own to fully realize what guerrilla war is like. We are sending conventional troops to do an unconventional job.³⁵

McNamara requested the deployment of an additional 35,000 support troops on 22 September 1965, bringing the total U.S. commitment to 210,000. President Johnson said he had no choice but to approve the increase.³⁶

300,000 TROOPS

On 21 October 1965, General Depuy, the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) J-3 (Operations) briefed the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense and Joint Chiefs of Staff, Ambassador Taylor and others on General Westmoreland's Phase II program for deploying additional forces to Vietnam. General Depuy explained that ARVN forces would be employed in pacification actions behind a fighting screen of U.S. units. The U.S. would do the fighting in an effort to buy time for the South Vietnamese Government to stabilize and continue their program of mobilizing additional forces. General Westmoreland intended to draw the North Vietnamese and VC forces out of their base areas and engage them on the open battlefield. He felt that they would crumble under the sheer mass of U.S. firepower. General Depuy then informed the group that the U.S. could not keep adequate pressure on

the VC without the deployment of 115,000 additional troops during 1966. This figure would bring the total U.S. troop strength to 325,000 by the end of that year.³⁷

William Bundy, the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, attended the meeting and wrote a policy paper for several White House advisors, including McGeorge Bundy. He felt that a major weakness in the plan presented by General Depuy was that it did not anticipate any attempt by the DRV to increase forces in the South and thus underestimated the total force requirement necessary to achieve the objective of bringing the North to the bargaining table. He also presented three broad policy options. The first proposed a pause in combat operations to entice the North to begin bargaining. If this failed, the U.S. should commence the Phase II deployments and increase bombing actions in the North. Second, immediately begin Phase II deployments, without increasing the bombing effort. Third, complete the phase I deployments, pause deployments to determine the effect on both the North and South and continue the present bombing campaign. He recommended the second option.³⁸

400,000 TROOPS

Secretary McNamara visited Vietnam on 28-29 November 1965 and reported his findings and recommendations to President Johnson on 30 November 1965. He reported that there was a serious threat of inflation due to the U.S. build-up, the Key government was surviving but not gaining support or taking any constructive action toward that end and that the pacification program is completely stalled, with no guarantee of security anywhere. He reported that the most significant changes in the general situation were on the military side. The North had increased infiltration of regular forces, VC recruitment efforts were making gains in the South and both were demonstrating a willingness to stand and fight, even in large-scale engagements. The infiltration rate of regular forces had increased from a rate of three per month in 1964 to 9-12 battalion equivalents per month. This meant that the enemy could be expected to increase their strength from 110 to 150 battalion equivalents during 1966. McNamara recommended to President Johnson that the U.S. bring the total strength to 400,000 troops during 1966 and indicated that the deployment of an additional 200,000 may be required in 1967.³⁹

The Embassy in Vietnam had a new Ambassador, Henry C. Lodge. He wrote a rather glowing message to the State Department on 12 January 1966. Lodge claims that the decision to commit a significant number of troops to the effort has yielded positive results on behalf of the Vietnamese. They see the willingness of the U.S. to commit troops as a catalyst to increasing their own effort. The reinforcements have not gone unanswered by the North. He states that the Army of North Vietnam has visibly entered the struggle, transforming the complexion of the war. He claims that this happened because the balance of military power had shifted to the South and must be countered with the addition of additional forces from the North.⁴⁰

In the following months, debate among the leaders and advisors continued, with requirements ranging from 600,000 to as high as 1 million men to secure the future of South Vietnam. On 14 October 1966, Secretary McNamara states in a memorandum to President Johnson that ROLLING THUNDER

has not reduced infiltration from the North or cracked the morale of Hanoi. He recommends increasing the troop strength to 470,000, but indicates that this number may not be sufficient to break the will of the North.⁴¹

GRAND TOTAL, 575,000

General Westmoreland reported to Washington on 28 April 1967 to report to the progress of the war in Vietnam directly to Congress. He gave a resounding speech in which he called for a "minimum essential" force of 550,500 and an "optimum" strength of 670,000.⁴² Secretary McNamara's systems analysts could not justify the optimum force, so he approved the increase to 575,000, the peak U.S. troop strength authorized during the Vietnam War.⁴³

CONCLUSION

The escalation of the War in Vietnam was a direct result of the inability of the U.S. to make a firm commitment during the early stages of the conflict. Had we better understood the situation early in the game, we may have known that an immediate and strong commitment of U.S. forces could have forced Hanoi to accept the South Vietnamese Government and the continued partitioning of the country.

The U.S. found itself in a position where it was constantly reacting to unanticipated actions by the North instead of proactively anticipating and thwarting their every move. All of the sources consulted in the preparation of this text generally refer to the feeling that Hanoi seemed to be one step ahead of our every move.

Our inability to predict reactions by the North may have been the result of unavailable or inaccurate intelligence. We were simply guessing what they would do instead of creating the circumstances that would force them into limited courses of action that we could adequately plan to counter.

We certainly did not understand the culture of a people that placed such little value on human life. We did not understand the willingness of a few dedicated individual soldiers to throw caution to the wind and attack a force of far superior numbers while expecting little military gain in return.

The fact that the U.S. had the military power to defeat the DRV/VC has never been questioned. President Johnson could have deployed sufficient forces to launch a massive offensive operation to rapidly defeat the North. However, uncertainty regarding the Soviet and Chinese reaction to large-scale operations against one of their communist surrogates prevented such an action. President Johnson and his top advisors believed that if either of these two nations were drawn militarily into the conflict, a nuclear war could result. Nuclear war was obviously something to avoid at all costs and thus we gradually escalated our participation in the conflict to placate the communist nuclear powers of the world.

OPERATION ROLLING THUNDER is another example of piecemeal application of military power in an attempt to take some form of retaliatory action, but yet not appear overly aggressive to the Soviets or Chinese. The intent of the campaign was to break the will of the North and interdict the flow of men and material moving south. The restrictions placed on executing the air campaign significantly reduced its effectiveness and limited the impact on the North. Though painful, the bombings seemed to stiffen the

resolve of the North Vietnamese communists and give them a means to rally internal support for their cause. The air defenses around the target areas were achieving some success in shooting down U.S. aircraft. However, their most significant impact was to give the DRV an ability to undermine the U.S. national will by parading captured pilots in front of the media. These demeaning events were broadcast throughout the U.S. on news programs and caused the American people to question our involvement in Vietnam.

The fact that the U.S. air campaign was failing to block the flow of supplies and men from the North was well known to the military and civilian leaders. They also knew that the communists were stockpiling material within sanctuaries located in Laos and Cambodia, without fear of U.S. action. Eventually the U.S. began operations to eliminate these sanctuaries, but the damage had already been done. Significant quantities of the supplies had made their way to their final destination and taken their toll on U.S., GVN and allied forces. Again, had the U.S. taken action against these sanctuaries early in the war, the DRV and VC operations in the south may not have been as effective, enticing the communists to negotiate a peace settlement.

The tactical ability of the U.S. forces to conduct aggressive offensive and defensive operations was always far superior to those of the DRV and VC forces. We could have met them on any battlefield and carried the day, but the enemy knew this and avoided such battles. DRV and VC forces fought in a manner very different from how the U.S. was trained to fight. The DRV and VC avoided large-scale combat operations and primarily used guerrilla tactics to harass U.S. forces, inflict casualties and buy time for their cause.

The U.S. conducted limited operations from our enclaves, inflicting a high number of casualties on the enemy, but not achieving overall operational or strategic success. Our limited operations gave the enemy time to build sufficient forces and material to launch the 1968 Tet offensive, which served as the culminating point for the American peoples' support for the war.

Regardless of the cause, the U.S. committed forces to the conflict in a piecemeal manner. This played a significant role in the eventual military and political losses that contributed to the strategic failure.

WORD COUNT 4520

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